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ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 72

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SOC 4 The Man Who Lost China (orig under Crozier)

The Man Who Lost China

by Brian Crozier (with the collaboration of Eric Chou)

(Scribner's; $12.95)

Among the smaller legacies Jimmy Carter will soon discover as he explores the debris of the Oval Office is something called the "GRC," also known as the Government of the Republic of China. It was bequeathed to him as a problem not only by Presidents Nixon and Ford, but more centrally by a man who died in April 1975, while South Vietnam was collapsing, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek.

Chiang was 87 when he died; and for nearly 48 of those years he had held predominant power in Nationalist China—22 on the mainland, 26 in "temporary" exile on the island of Taiwan. Political longevity made him remarkable. So did his influence, for years, on American foreign policy and domestic politics. So, now, does his legacy: the thorny Taiwan issue that still prevents normal diplomatic relations between the US and the real China.

Such a man deserves a non-hagiographic biography. And the effort by Brian Crozier, a veteran British journalist, looks promising at the outset—especially with that teasing title, *The Man Who Lost China*. How many careers have been ruined, even lives snuffed out, thanks to that nastiest of charges, in more than one country!

Losing China, you see, was no mean feat—not some needle in a haystack, but instead a great big country, with more people than anyone can ever count. So to be accused in Russia of losing China, as many were under Stalin in the '30s, resulted in execution or long imprisonment. The same accusation in the US, after Mao Tse-tung's victory, produced the maiming or banishment of our finest China expertise both inside and outside government.

So to suggest, as Crozier's title does, that perhaps *a Chinese* lost China is at least a small step forward. But the lingo is still misleading for a fundamental reason: to "lose" a nation, you really must have *had* it in the first place. And neither foreign advisers—whether Soviet or American—nor Chinese Nationalists, nor Chiang Kai-shek, ever "had" China sufficiently to lose it.

That, indeed, is one perhaps inadvertent message of this tedious and muddled book. As the author jogs uncertainly through the dark alleys of Chinese political and military history in the first half of this century, he does tell us of the severe external limitations on Chiang's power: untamed warlords, Kuomintang factions, Western privileges, Japanese invaders and Communist rebels—to name only a few. Indeed, at its high point of control in the promising Nanking years (*ca.* 1936) Chiang's government actually held direct sway only in the lower Yangtze River valley—about five of 22 provinces; the rest (excluding Manchuria) were governed through highly unstable alliances.

The book presents other difficulties. One has learned—notably from Barbara Tuchman on Stilwell—that biography can provide the foreground for a rich tapestry of historical narrative. But Crozier and his collaborator have reversed the process. They have written a chaotic, slipshod history of the (also chaotic) post-1911 Chinese revolution, and after 1927 a history of its Kuomintang wing—with a mysterious one-dimensional figure named Chiang Kai-shek coming on and off stage to provide some slight continuity. In the first sentence of his first chapter Crozier terms Chiang "inscrutable." He might as well have stopped there, for after 399 pages our insight into the man is still not much greater.

I should add that as someone who has tried to fathom Chiang, I sympathize with the problem. A rigid ascetic in the midst of rampant corruption; a Confucian convert to Methodism who apparently practiced both; an admirer simultaneously of European fascism and the YMCA's social gospel; a man who seemed to trust no one except, occasionally, members of his family; a noncharismatic orator and nonreflective writer; a military mind addicted to medieval tactics. How to penetrate or capture such a person—particularly, as in Crozier's case, when Chiang's language and culture are totally alien?

The author's solution is to rely heavily on one Eric Chou, a Chinese journalist who lived through the Kuomintang era. Chou flits in and out of the narrative as the authority for far too many assertions and remembered quotations ("according to Eric Chou," "according to Eric Chou's sources," etc.). Otherwise Crozier simply borrows sizeable gobbets, here and there, now and then, from several other writers on 20th-century China.

His borrowings seem quite random but reflect spotty judgment. For instance, he attributes to Edgar Snow, yet again, the description of the Yenan Communists as simply "agrarian reformers." The term actually originated with the British leftist-turned-rightist Freda Utley. And Snow himself never lost his original clear perception of them as dedicated Marxist-Leninists (as Kenneth Shewmaker has so carefully shown).

Crozier's greatest lapses seem to relate to Chiang's greatest problem: American policy in China. On this subject he has rehashed the stale, discredited charges against the US Foreign Service officers who became the McCarthy-McCarran victims in the early 1950s—those Americans then accused of "losing China." He has apparently not read the State Department's slowly released special volumes on China, 1941-49, nor the dispatches of the officers themselves—all of which tend to document and exonerate their judgment at the time: that the Communists would certainly win unless we jarred the KMT into reform; and that we should assist the Communists, *in our long-term national interest*, in order both to pressure the KMT and to keep our hand in the game if indeed the Communists should prevail.

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